

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 AID-05

DHA-02 /064 W

----- 109398

R 121405Z JUL 76

FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4411

INFO AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

AMEMBASSY MANAGUA

AMEMBASSY PANAMA

AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR

AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN JOSE 3374

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PGOV, CS

SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM DEFEATED:

FIGUERES CANNOT BE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE
IN 1978 ELECTION

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: THE FIRST STEP IN THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM PROCESS TO PERMIT RE-ELECTION OF EX-PRESIDENTS WAS ROUNDLY DEFEATED IN THE COSTA RICAN ASSEMBLY. JOSE FIGUERES CANNOT BE A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE IN 1978. FOCUS IS NOW ON WHETHER FIGUERES AND SUPPORTERS, OUT OF PIQUE, WILL FORM A NEW "FIGUERISTA" PARTY, AS HAS BEEN ANNOUNCED PUBLICLY, AND SPLIT THE GOVERNMENT PARTY. ACCORDING TO A NUMBER OF LOCAL POLS, FIGUERES IS USING THREAT OF SPLITTING PARTY TO IMPOSE A CANDIDATE OF HIS CHOICE, WHICH DOES NOT INCLUDE CURRENT FRONT-RUNNER LUIS ALBERTO MONGE. END SUMMARY.

2. COSTA RICAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY JULY 8 ROUNDLY DEFEATED CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM EFFORT, PUSHED SINCE LAST NOVEMBER BY PRO-FIGUERES FORCES, TO PERMIT THE THREE TIMES EX-PRESIDENT TO RUN AGAIN FOR PRESIDENCY.
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VOTE WAS 49-7; 22 VOTES AGAINST CAME FROM PLN--FIGUERES'

OWN PARTY. DEBATE ON A SUBJECT WHICH HAS BEEN NO. 1 POLITICAL TOPIC FOR PAST MONTHS, AND ESPECIALLY PAST WEEKS, WAS SURPRISINGLY FREE OF POLITICAL RANCOR. PLN SPEAKERS WHO VOTED AGAINST WERE CAREFUL NOT TO CRITICIZE FIGUERES, AND TO BASE THEIR ARGUMENTS ON LOFTY PRINCIPLE.

3. MOST SIGNIFICANT ASSEMBLY REMARKS WERE THOSE OF STAUNCHLY PRO-FIGUERES AND PRO-REFORM DEPUTY VICENTE, WHO NOTED POINTEDLY THAT PLN WILL EMERGE STRONGER FROM THIS FIGUERES/RE-ELECTION CRISIS, AND THAT NATIONAL INTERESTS COME BEFORE THOSE OF PARTY. PRIVATE INTERPRETATION OF ANTI-REFORM PLN DEPUTIES IS THAT VICENTE'S MEASURED COMMENTS INDICATE THAT THE FIGUERES CROWD IS GIVING SECOND THOUGHT TO THE STRATEGY OF FORMING A NEW FIGUERISTA PARTY.

4. NO ONE, HOWEVER, IS PREPARED TO SAY THAT THE GOVERNMENT PARTY, PLN, IS OUT OF THE WOODS OVER THE GRAVE INTERNAL PROBLEMS CAUSED BY THE RECENT MOVES OF FIGUERES AND HIS POLITICAL FRIENDS. THE CITIZENS' PRO-CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM COMMITTEE IS STILL ON THE PUBLIC RECORD WITH A BITING DECLARATION ISSUED ON JULY 1 WHICH STATED THAT DEFEAT OF REFORM IN THE ASSEMBLY MEANT A "LACK OF RESPECT" FOR FIGUERES. THEY PROMISED THAT NEW "FIGUERESTA" PARTY WAS TO BE FORMED. ALSO, FIGUERES-CONFIDANT GONZALO SOLORZANO IS QUOTED IN JULY 9 MEDIA THAT THE NEW PARTY WILL BE REGISTERED IN A SHORT TIME.

5. FIGUERES, IN MEANTIME, HOLDS THAT HE IS NOT INVOLVED IN THE ACTIVITIES OF HIS FRIENDS TO FORM A NEW PARTY. FIGUERES NOW SAYS PRIVATELY (AFTER HIS ASSEMBLY DEFEAT) THAT HE AND FOLLOWERS WILL LET MATTERS SETTLE FOR A LITTLE WHILE TO LATER DECIDE NEXT STEPS.

6. COMMENT: THE ASSEMBLY VOTE WAS NOT UNEXPECTED; FIGUERES KNEW WEEKS AGO THAT THE YOUNGER GENERATION OF HIS PARTY WOULD NOT SUPPORT HIM IN HIS BID. WHY HE WENT THROUGH WITH IT IS THE LOGICAL QUESTION; THE RESPONSE, ACCORDING TO SOME OBSERVERS, IS TO SET THE STAGE FOR THE

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STRONGEST POSSIBLE FIGUERES ROLE IN HIS PARTY'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SELECTION.

7. WITH CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM BURIED, THE POLITICAL QUESTION IS WHETHER FIGUERES WILL ALLOW A NEW PARTY BEARING HIS NAME TO BE FORMED--A MOVE WHICH WOULD SPLIT THE PLN AND INDEED BE THE WORST CRISIS IN THE PARTY'S HISTORY. THE LINE OF REASONING MOST HEARD IS THAT FIGUERES

WILL USE THE THREAT OF SPLITTING THE PARTY TO IMPOSE THE
CANDIDATE OF HIS CHOICE, OR OF HIS APPROVAL. LATTER
DOES NOT INCLUDE THE CURRENT FRONT RUNNER,
LUIS ALBERTO MONGE, WHO IS POPULARLY DESCRIBED AS A
"LEFTIST" AND WHO FIGUERES DOES NOT THINK CAN OR
SHOULD BE THE NEXT PRESIDENT OF COSTA RICA. THE
CURRENT CROP OF CANDIDATES ACCEPTABLE TO FIGUERES IS REPORTABLE
HEADED BY FOREIGN MINISTER FACIO, BUT INCLUDES MINISTER OF AGRI-
CULTURE GARRON, MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS JENKINS, AND
VICE PRESIDENT CASTILLO. MANEUVERING INVOLVING ALL
OF THESE AND OTHER PLN FIGUERES (NOT THE LEAST OF WHOM
IS PRESIDENT ODUBER--WHO IS KEEPING HIS PREFERENCES TO
HIMSELF) AND, OF COURSE, JOSE FIGUERES, HAS ALREADY
BEGUN. EVEN PRO-FIGUERES COUP RUMORS ARE BEING HEARD ONCE THEM
--ALTHOUGH THE EMBASSY DISCOUNTS THEM.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ELECTION LAW, CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 12 JUL 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: ElyME
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976SANJO03374
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760268-0399
From: SAN JOSE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760768/aaaachjh.tel
Line Count: 131
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: ElyME
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 15 JUL 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <15 JUL 2004 by coburnhl>; APPROVED <27 OCT 2004 by ElyME>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM DEFEATED: FIGUERES CANNOT BE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE
TAGS: PFOR, PGOV, CS
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006